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“The punishment must fit the crime!” the priestess shouts.

When I was little, Mom always told me, “Too much screen time’ll turn your brains to mush!” or “Stop staring at that screen! Do something constructive!” I’d explain that I was doing something constructive; the internet was teaching me things that no tree or rock could. She never bought it.

“The punishment must fit the crime!” the crowd choruses.

Older folks always called us the “technological generation.” No generation before us had lived their entire lives connected through those screens. They talked like it made us fundamentally different somehow. I never bought it.

“Light the fire!” the priestess shouts. Two men, one wearing a thorn circlet, the other a Coca-Cola crown, step forward and light the pyre below the cauldron. I laugh a little at the juxtaposition of these icons. No one else finds it funny.

Business as usual continued for decades. But somewhere in there, we realized people weren’t as happy anymore. It wasn’t that things “weren’t as good as when I was young.” I’m not nostalgic. Our long-term happiness studies—all the rage around the early naughts—were finding, across the board, lower levels of dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, everything. In everyone.

By now, the murmur of the crowd has risen to a dull roar. It still can’t quite drown out the bubbling in the cauldron. Not long now.

We were frantic to figure out what was going on—there was money behind it. An economy doesn’t function when people don’t think that materialism leads to happiness. It was the screens. The data showed it, clear as day. After we published, it was just a matter of time.

The two men take the cauldron from the flames, and mount it on the pedestal above my head. The crowd’s going wild.

Society separated into castes: Those who could hire others for their screen work, and us, who did the work. Not exactly sustainable. Us screeners quickly realized how much more numerous we were than the Luddites, and when your future happiness is at stake, you don’t joke around. After the war, no one used screens.

The roar of the crowd coalesces into a chant: “TECHNOPHILE! TECHNOPHILE!”

But this was no utopia for long. Civil order collapsed first, civilization shortly thereafter. Histories were destroyed as servers were trashed. Tribes developed rituals out of jumbled imagery, and taboos against the screens in reaction to the chaos the screens had brought. I had thought we were discovering our salvation—I never meant to bring about this hell on earth, to throw away the progress of our last thousand years. I just wanted to publish.

“He stared at the glass!”

Not many still remember “before.” I just wanted to start rebuilding before losing it forever. I scrounged the parts to boot up an old hard drive, start teaching.

The whole crowd jeers. With a nod from the priestess, the cauldron attendants slowly tip the molten material over my head. My eyes glaze over.

—Peter Meyer Reimer
Honorable Mention, Broadside “Glass” Flash Fiction Contest



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